

Jesus at the Center of the Kingdom

The Secret Place • Message 2

JC Thompson

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Prayer Points for Prayer Time:

- Pray for a sincere heart in prayer.
- Pray that your prayer life reflects your love for Him.
- Ask God to increase your faith to trust that he already knows your needs.

Scripture Reading:

When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you. When you pray, don't babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don't be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask Him!

Matthew 6:5-8 (NLT)

A. Introduction.

We are continuing our series entitled *Jesus at the Center of the Kingdom*. This summer, we are covering the second portion of the *Sermon on the Mount* and will wrap up portion three next summer.

This passage begins with the phrase, *When you pray*. This is the essential element of prayer. A Christian prays. But have you ever sat down to pray and thought to yourself, *Is anyone there?* Maybe you've felt like your prayers are just bouncing off the ceiling and right back at you.

Matthew Henry says, *You may as soon find a living man who does not breathe, [than] a living Christian that does not pray.*

Yet many of us struggle in prayer. Today, in our passage, Jesus is guiding us to move from performance and frustration to true intimacy and power in our prayer lives.

Prayer is the food on which the Christian survives. By it we are sustained, fed, grow, feel, and move in obedience to the will of our Father. Prayer is an essential discipline, one that allows us to speak to God about our thoughts, desires, and motives. It allows us to bask in the character of God. It gives us access to move things on Earth through spiritual influence. Praying men and women move the Earth. Praying men and women grasp the realities of dependence and value in this life. Praying men and women begin to relate to God more and more in a relational intimacy than just a person in whom they have heard of.

When Jesus presented His sermon on the mount in Matthew 5-7, He shared practical truths for living the life of a disciple of Christ, and in this passage today, Jesus speaks of prayer.

There is probably nothing in our Christian lives that gets more airtime but also has lack of activity, as prayer.

Prayer is an essential discipline in the life of a follower of Jesus. It is an act that is purely dependent on receiving from Christ. It is not about our knowledge, skills, or resourcefulness. Instead, it is most effective when we are most dependent on receiving from Jesus.

But many of us get intimidated by prayer; we get tripped up. It gets crowded out by things we view as more urgent or, even more sadly, as more important.

But Jesus guides us in how we should approach our prayer lives and gives us things that we must get right in having a prayer life that grows deeper and deeper.

B. Approaching God in prayer

1. WHO you approach changes HOW you approach. (Matthew 6:5-6. C/R: Psalm 91:1; Hebrews 11:24-26)

When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them. I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get. But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

Matthew 6:5-6 (NLT)

Jesus is communicating that you need to know who you are praying to. In the example of the hypocrites, they are praying to the public, and I think you can make an argument that they are actually praying to themselves. They are praying for people to see them, perhaps to gain notoriety or popularity, but mostly, their desire to pray publicly comes from a desire to bask in their own glory and not the glory of the Father.

When we pray, our eyes, our focus, and our attention should be on God.

Is God's opinion of you the most important perspective in your life when it comes to your practices? Even more than your family, your work, your followers, your friends? Even yourself?

There were times appointed for prayer, so people would participate in public activities to bring attention to their religious fervor. They would find ways to practice their prayers in public. (Psalm 55:17, Daniel 6:10)

Today, this might not be the marketplace or on the street, but social media. Are your private practices with God something you share with others to be seen by them? Are you more concerned with people perceiving you to be a spiritual person, or are you more concerned with being a spiritual person?

Now, it is important to note that Jesus is not condemning public prayer. He is condemning public prayer that is prayed with an attitude of vain glory or associated with puffing ourselves up in the eyes of others.

Both the hypocrites' approach to prayer and the disciples of Jesus are rewarded for their prayers. It is important to know this both as a follower of Jesus and when sharing with people who are not yet followers of Christ.

Both behaviors offer some kind of reward. Sinful orientation or worshipping something other than God offers something to a person. Just as praying in private to God offers a reward. This is crucial in our growth with Christ.

When we are sharing the gospel of Christ with others, it is important to understand that there is some type of reward that a person believes they are receiving in believing what they do.

This is also the same thing for believers who are struggling to obey the Word and Spirit of God. We gain something from our disobedience.

When we eat more than we need, when we yell, when we get anxious, when we doomscroll, when we look at pornography, when we try to control something, when we take another drink, all offer a reward to us. And we believe that behavior offers a greater reward than obeying the command of God.

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter and chose to suffer with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasure of sin. For he considered reproach for the sake of Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, since he was looking ahead to the reward.

Hebrews 11:24-26 (CSB)

Moses chose a greater reward. The reward that came from suffering for the sake of Christ.

Do you believe that the reward that God offers to you in private prayer, in faithful relationship to Him, is worth more than the reward of doing religion for the praise of others publicly?

In the case of the hypocrites, they believe that a reward in public is greater than a reward from their Father, who loves them.

What reward do you value most?

Verse 6 speaks of going into a room and shutting the door. Many derive the idea of a prayer closet from this passage. I think each of us needs to have a dedicated space for prayer: a closet, chair, bench outside, perhaps your car. Somewhere that you know is the place where you get focused and have solitary time with the Lord. But we have a tendency to be paralyzed by perfection, or we can put too much emphasis on the tools that we use rather than just getting started in prayer.

We see this in Scripture as well. Isaac went into a field to pray. Jesus went to a mountain top, and Peter went on top of a home. But do not lose focus on the duty of prayer at the expense of not being able to find the perfect place or time.

A wonderful example of this in history comes from a mother of 10 children. Susanna Wesley had 19 children, 9 of whom passed in infancy. She had a rough life riddled by loss and suffering. Yet she made her time with the Lord a priority. She committed to spending 2 hours daily with the Lord.

Her secret place?

She would sit at their dining table with her Bible and pull her apron over her head. Her children knew not to interrupt her unless it was a dire emergency.

Susanna raised 2 of the most iconic figures in Church History. Charles and John Wesley.

John became the father of the Methodist movement and probably was the first to organize small group ministries as a primary strategy.

Charles, also a leader in Methodism, wrote over 6,000 hymns, including *O, For a Thousand Tongues to Sing* and *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*.

Scripture gives us a picture of this idea that when we get into the secret place, we discover more about the character of God.

Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty.

Psalms 91:1 (NLT)

Knowing who we are approaching in prayer sets a foundation for how we approach prayer.

2. HOW you approach changes WHY you pray.

(Matthew 6:7-8. C/R: Jeremiah 29:13; James 4:8)

When you pray, don't babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don't be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask Him!

Matthew 6:7-8 (NLT)

The next thing that Jesus points to is babbling in our prayers. The ESV uses "empty phrases" and the KJV uses "vain repetitions".

I think these translations help us understand more clearly the idea that Jesus is speaking to. Are the words we are using a reflection of our heart, or are they just words that we are saying?

Babble – battalgeo. The Greek here means babble on, so Jesus is saying: do not babble on, do not mindlessly or endlessly repeat things.

Many words do not make more effective prayers.

When you are first learning to pray, I think that you can be so concerned with proper technique and perfect language. But this isn't what the Scriptures point out as the priority in prayer. They point out that the priority in prayer instead is our heart and making ourselves available to the Lord.

In fact, in Richard Foster's book *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, he describes the beginning stages of prayer as just bringing yourself to God, warts and all. He describes *in the same way a small child cannot draw a bad picture, so a child of God cannot offer a bad prayer*.

The Gentiles believe that the length of prayer led to more effective answering of prayer. But Jesus says our prayers are answered not because of the length of our prayer or the accuracy of our prayer, but because God loves us.

This is expressed in Jeremiah.

If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me.

Jeremiah 29:13 (NLT)

Jesus is not desiring for us to not pray for a long time, nor is He worried or concerned about the length of our prayers. What He is concerned about is the belief that the length or words of our prayers will somehow persuade God to answer our prayers.

God knows exactly what we need before we even ask. In some ways, this is so unbelievably exciting. The God of this universe is more acquainted with your personal needs than even you are. He has an answer before we know we have a need.

A reasonable question would be: Why pray to God if He already knows what you need? Before we answer that question, I think it would be better for us to first answer the question of what the purpose of prayer is in the first place.

I'd like to give you some principles of prayer:

1. Jesus prayed. He is our model; if it is good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for us.
2. We are not praying to get God to do our will, but instead to get God's will accomplished on Earth.
3. There is something more than requests and getting what we need in prayer. There is a relational communication and intimacy that grows in prayer.
 - a. Some of this happens in discovering God's will in your life and circumstances in prayer.
 - b. Some of this lack of immediate answer to prayer leads to trust in God's character as you persevere in prayer.
 - c. Sometimes God's timing gives us more of what we need than an immediate answer.
4. God not only gives us what we need but also exceeds what we even ask for. The times I have heard someone say, *God blessed me even more than I could have imagined*, are too many to count.

When we view prayer as primarily transactional, we miss the priority of prayer that Jesus teaches us, to grow in our understanding of God and thus grow in our relationship with Him.

Dating Long Distance

Kristen, my wife and I have been married for 17 years. Before we got married, we dated for about 4 years. 2.5 years of that was long distance, and 1 year was REAL long distance. While I was in college, she was at a Bible institute in Argentina, learning Spanish and running Summer Camps for kids.

When I think of prayer and the different motivations and conversations in prayer, it reminds me of those long-distance days. When we first started dating, we would talk for a long time, and words just flowed, but we would also fall asleep on the phone, just being with one another.

When we were long-distance, we didn't get to talk every day; in fact, sometimes it would be weeks. When we did get to talk, it felt fast and rushed, and we never got enough time. We also became more intentional with our conversations. I didn't want to waste my time. Ya boi was trying to get married.

Both of these things are proper approaches in our conversations with God. Would I have chosen to have more and more conversations with Kristen instead of less? Yes.

But, at the same time, our conversations became more prioritized, our words and time became shorter, but the topics and intensity became more of the priority.

But the thing I remember most is the distance and what I felt, the struggles of where she was and what was happening over there. We didn't have FaceTime back then, young people!

Many of you might be experiencing something similar in your prayer life. God might feel a continent away. Many of us in this room can find prayer difficult. This isn't because we don't believe in its power or priority, but because real life gets in the way. If you feel like you struggle in prayer, you are not the only one.

Here are some common obstacles that many of us experience in our prayer lives.

Obstacles:

1. **Busyness and External Demands** – I've got two boys with expanding social calendars, it may feel like there is always something to do. Life moves fast, but God wants our hearts and love is not fast.
2. **Distraction** – Anyone have a smartphone? Yeah, we are distracted.
3. **Spiritual Drought** – Maybe you feel distant or dry in your times with the Lord lately.
4. **Unbelief** – If you are struggling with doubt, just know that Jesus is not intimidated by your questions; in fact, He welcomes them in prayer if you are willing to listen
5. **Sin or Guilt** – Maybe shame is keeping you from time with the Lord. You might think God doesn't want to hear from you, but the cross says something different. Bring your shame and guilt to the cross and accept the forgiveness that He offers you.

Close

I think many of us run into these obstacles no matter where we are on our journey.

Some of you might feel as distant from God as I felt from Kristen. God might feel like He is in Argentina to you. Some of you might feel overwhelmed at the distance between where you are currently in your prayer life and where you want to be. Some might just feel stuck. I want you to know that God already sees you, He loves you and wants to meet you exactly where you are right now.

Here are some things to do this week to take a step:

1. **Set a Time and Place** – Pick a quiet spot that you will meet with God this week.
2. **Choose a phrase** – Sit with one truth about God or something you need from Him. This may come from the devotionals this week. You could even ask God what He wants you to focus on this week.
3. **Pray for a Person** – Ask God once a day at least to meet one person where they are right now.

Imagine this week moving one step closer to having the type of prayer life and relationship with God that you want. Imagine experiencing intimacy, peace, clarity, and power that comes from being with Jesus in the secret place. Imagine seeing God move in the life of someone you are praying for this week.